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ABSTRACT

Contemporary realistic fiction allows young readers/listeners to experience events that they would never encounter in real life or practice what they might someday experience. Realistic fiction benefits children as they may: see past the limitations of their own experiences; learn to reflect on choices in their own lives; acquire sympathy for other people; and come to feel that they are not alone. This paper describes 20 works of fiction for children which focus on personal feelings, family relationships, extended families, families in transition, cultural diversity, and disabilities. The paper gives the plot of each book and suggests how the teacher might approach or discuss the novel or how the students might respond to the novel. (NKA)

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LITERATURE HELPS YOUNG CHILDREN FACE PROBLEMS IN TODAY'S WORLD

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Young children (both girls and boys) enjoy stories about children their own age or slightly older, and about daily life and familiar experiences. Contemporary realistic fiction presents such stories in which children can see themselves as well as stories through which they can see the world. Such fiction allows readers/listeners to experience events that they would never encounter in real life or practice what they might someday experience. And all this occurs in the security and safety of being readers/listeners in their own classroom or home.

Realistic fiction benefits children as they may:

--see past the limitations of their own experiences;

--learn to reflect on choices in their own lives;

--acquire sympathy for other people; and

--come to feel that they are not alone.

Characters in contemporary realistic fiction resemble real people. They live in a place that is or could be real. Conflict develops as these characters cope with such problems as family relationships, personal feelings, physical disabilities; cultural diversity, etc. They participate in a plausible, even probable, series of events; are presented with a dilemma that is interesting to children; and find a realistic solution to that dilemma.

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PROBLEM AREAS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN TODAY'S WORLD

A. PERSONAL FEELINGS

1. JAMAICA TAG-ALONG by J. Havill. (Houghton, 1986).
Plot: Jamaica's brother Ossie doesn't want her tagging along to shoot baskets, and .when she tries to join in the game anyway, Ossie yells and tells her to go swing. Later when a younger child tries to help her build a sand castle, she says rude things to him. After she recalls how much it hurt when Ossie treated her unkindly, she lets the little boy play and soon her brother comes to join them.
Response: Review with the class "Warm Fuzzies" and "Cold Prickles" and chart words from the story that might hurt people's feelings. Then chart words that would show kindness. Finally have the children each write in their journals a personal description of a "Warm Fuzzy" they once received.

2 WILSON SAT ALONE by D. Hess. (Simon. 1994).
Plot: Wilson is a loner who never laughs or becomes involved with the other children at school. One day a new girl in the class named Sara shows him how to break out of his shell and join his classmates.
Response: Discuss how one act of kindness changed Wilson's outlook on life. Then have the children each choose someone for whom they can do a kindly act, especially someone who is not a family member. The following week ask the children each to write an Acrostic Poem using the name of the person to whom they had been kind.

3 ALEXANDER WHO'S NOT (DO YOU HEAR ME? I MEAN IT!) GOING TO MOVE. by J. Viorst. (Simon, 1995).
Plot: The family is relocating due to the father's job. Alexander doesn't want to move away from his home and friends because he is afraid that he won't meet any new friends and won't be able to play soccer. With encouragement from his family and classmates, he agrees to move this time—but never again!
Response: Have students imagine what it would be like to move away from their home and friends. Then have them each write a short paragraph about what they would miss most about their present home. (Some children may have already experienced a family move, so they will wish to write about their reactions at that time.)

4. ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY by J. Viorst. (Macmillan, 1972).
Plot: The story follows Alexander through a very bad day. He wakes up with gum in his hair, his best friend is mean to him, he has no dessert in his lunch, and he has lima beans for dinner! That evening Alexander thinks seriously about running away—to Australia!
Response: Encourage discussion about how everyone can have a bad day. Than have students each web other "bad" events that could happen to them (e.g., a flat bicycle tire) and later write their own story.

5. IRA SLEEPS OVER by B. Waber. (Houghton, 1972).
Plot: Ira is excited about his first sleepover until his sister asks if he is taking his teddy bear along. Ira has never slept without the bear before so he leaves it at home. Later after he and Reggie have told ghost stories, Reggie gets scared and grabs his teddy bear to sleep with him. Ira then realizes that he also needs his bear, goes home to retrieve it, and then returns to finish the sleepover with his friend.
Response: Have children each create a bag filled with paper copies of items they would take if they were going to a sleepover. First, provide scissors and pieces of construction paper so they can draw and and cut out the different items they would bring. Next, give them each plastic bags in which to place those "items". They may then explain (or write labels for) the items they put into their sleepover bag.

B. FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

1. BET YOU CAN'T by P. Dale (Lippincott, 1987).
Plot: An older sister is cleaning up the playroom at bedtime when her younger brother challenges her about finishing certain tasks. The children play rival games ("Bet you can't, bet I can") as they pick up their toys. At the end, however, the game has changed to "Bet we can".
Response: Teach children the song,"Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better" (with the refrain, "I can do anything better than you. No, you can't. Yes, I can"). Divide the students into two groups: No, You Can't and Yes, I Can. Have the "Yes" group suggest a task that its members can do (e.g., stand on one foot for a minute). Have both groups sing the song. Then the "Yes" group tries to perform its suggested task. Later, switch groups and begin again.

2 DOGGER by S. Hughes. (Lothrop, Lee, 1987).
Plot: Dave loves his old stuffed animal Dogger as much as his sister Bella likes her seven teddy bears. One day Dave loses Dogger and looks for him everywhere. Then Dogger shows up at the school fair, but Dave has no money to buy the toy back. Only Bella can help him and it means that she will have to give up the beautiful door prize (a huge teddy) that she won that day...
Response: Have the children each bring in their favorite stuffed animal to share. Compare each of the toys by their sizes and softness and by whether they are new or worn, (The children may also wish to chart and compare the names of their special animals.)

3. I LOVE YOU THE PURPLEST by B. Jooss4. (Chronicle, 1996).
Plot: Mother and sons Max and Julian decide one summer evening to go fishing in their boat. Throughout the trip the boys persist in asking Mother questions to discover which son she loves best (e.g., Who is the best fisherman? Who is the best rower?). Mother replies in loving phrases that stress the best traits of each boy because she loves them equally albeit in different ways.
Response: Create a Venn diagram on the board: One circle represents Max and the other circle, Julian. Have class discuss unique traits of each boy as the teacher writes these in the circles. Then the class must decide which traits both boys have in common (e.g., a loving mother).

4. DADDY, WILL YOU MISS ME? by W. McCormick. (Simon, 1999).
Plot: A little boy's father goes on a business trip to Africa for a month, and the child misses him badly as he crosses off the days on the big kitchen calendar. Finally, the boy with his mother and baby sister go to the airport to welcome Daddy home.
Response: Discuss with the children various ways that their mothers or fathers show their love for the family. List these on the board, Remind them that whether "you're across the globe or just across town the love between a parent and child spans any distance". Have the children each write a short paragraph about how they can tell that their Mom or Daddy loves them.

5. A CHAIR FOR MY MOTHER by V. Williams. (Greenwillow, 1982).
Plot: After fire damages their apartment, Rosa, her mother, and her grandmother all work and save their money in a big glass jar until it is full. Then they shop for a comfortable armchair to replace the one lost in the fire. Everyone enjoys the new chair.
Response: Ask how each of the characters contribute coins to the jar. Discuss what their actions show about the kind of family that they are.

C. EXTENDED FAMILIES

1. THE WEDNESDAY SURPRISE by E. Bunting. (Clarion, 1094).
Plot: Anna spends Wednesday evenings reading with Grandma. On Anna's father's birthday, Grandma surprises her son (Anna's father) by reading a book aloud for the very first time in her life! She proves that no one is ever too old to learn how to read, and the family is happy that Anna has helped her grandmother meet her life-long goal.
Response: Have students discuss or write why it is important for everyone to know how to read. Some may wish to describe a reading experience they have had while sharing a particular book with a family member.

2. WATCH OUT FOR THE CHICKEN FEET IN YOUR SOUP by T. dePaola. (Prentice-Hall, 1974).
Plot: Joey is embarrassed to introduce his friend Eugene to his Italian grandmother. She is an old-fashioned woman who loves to cook and bake. Joey becomes unhappy when she pays more attention to his friend than to him, especially when she invites Eugene to help her make a special bread. Finally, Joey begins to appreciate and love his grandmother even more when he realizes how well she and his friend got along.
Response: Encourage students to think about the specific personality of their own grandmother or another grandmother that they know. Then distribute white and colored papers. Have students each draw models of grandmothers on the white paper, and then cut them out and paste them on the colored paper. Finally, have the students each briefly write about their admiration for grandmothers and why they are important members of the family.

D. FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

1. FLY AWAY HOME by E. Bunting. (Clarion, 1991).
Plot: Andrew and his father are homeless. They live in an airport until Dad can get a new job and afford a home. They become friends with the Medinas, a family that lives in the airport too and offers to look after Andrew while his Dad goes job hunting. One day Andrew sees a little bird caught in the airport and encourages it to fly away home since it can do so but Andrew cannot. Both families hope to have a real home again one day.
Response: Have children reflect upon what home means to them. Provide an assortment of geometric (construction paper) shapes, glue, scissors and paper. Ask the students to use the shapes to make images representing their own homes. Later, have them share their "Home Images" with their classmates.

2. PRISCILLA TWICE by J. Caseley. (Greenwillow, 1995).
Plot: Priscilla is having a difficult time dealing with the divorce of her parents and the custody arrangement: She spends one week with her mother and the next week with her father. After rebelling against both parents and feeling guilty, Priscilla begins to understand that even if she misbehaves, her parents still love her. Finally, she tells her teacher that there are different kinds of families and the teacher agrees.
Response: Ask the students to draw pictures of their own families and label each person (and pet). Arrange a class book with their drawings and entitle it All Our Families Are Special. Place it on the library table for everyone to "read".

E. CULTURAL DIVERSITY

1. SAM AND THE LUCKY MONEY by K. Chinn. (Lee & Low, 1995).
Plot: Sam lives in Chinatown in San Francisco. On New Year's Day he receives from his grandparents a gift of four dollars, each in a traditional envelope decorated with a symbol of luck. He goes shopping with his mother but cannot find anything he really wants for the small sum he has. Finally, Sam sees a homeless man who is barefoot and decides to give him the money so the man may at least buy some socks.
Response: Explain to the children that the Chinese New Year does not begin on January 1 as designated in many other countries; instead, it begins anywhere between January 21 and February 20 and is celebrated for four days. Ask the children how their families celebrate New Year's Day (e.g., watching the Rose Parade on television) as compared to one way that Sam and his family celebrated. (e.g., watching a firecracker show and listening to a street band).

2. AMAZING GRACE by M. Hoffman. (Dial Books, 1991).
Plot: Grace loves stories and acts out the most exciting parts for her Ma and Nana. At school one day when there is a chance to play Peter Pan, Grace wants the part. Her classmates however tell her that she cannot be Peter Pan because he is a boy and he is not black. However Nana takes Grace to see a ballet starring a dancer from Trinidad. That visit convinces Grace to audition for Peter Pan and she wins the part.
Response: Help the class list on the board familiar stories that could be dramatized by the students since Grace loved to act. (Be sure to include some tales that would allow girls to play boys' roles.) Then let the students choose one story that they could dramatize in front of another class.

3. TOO MANY TAMALES by G. Soto. (Putnam, 1993).
Plot: Maria tries on her mother's wedding ring while helping to make tamales for a traditional Hispanic Christmas gathering. She panics hours later when she realizes that the ring is missing. Instead of telling her mother what happened, she and her cousins believe that the ring has fallen into the tamales. So they proceed to eat all twenty-four of them in an effort to find the ring but to no avail. When Maria finally confronts her mother and tells her the problem, she notices the ring on her mother's finger. (Her mother had found it in the tamale dough.) The family laughs about the eaten tamales and joins together in the kitchen to make a second batch.
Response: Since Maria was caught doing something that she was not supposed to do, ask the students each to write about an episode when they too had a similar experience. Urge them to include the outcome and the lesson they learned from the episode.

F. DISABILITIES

1. NOW ONE FOOT, NOW THE OTHER by T. dePaola. (Putnam, 1981).
Plot: Bobby learned to walk with the help of his grandpa Bob. They used to play games together, go for walks, and tell stories. One day Grandpa has a stroke and has to spend months in the hospital. When he finally comes home, he cannot move or talk, so Bobby helps him just as Grandpa once helped him. Eventually Grandpa regains the ability to walk and talk although it is still difficult to do so.
Response: Have students prepare a class book entitled "We Help Others". Each child will write about one way that he or she helps family members or neighbors that need assistance (e.g., helping a younger brother or sister with homework).

2. LUCY'S PICTURE by N. Moon. (Dial Books, 1995).
Plot: Lucy's classmates are painting pictures but paint is not right for Lucy's picture. Since her Grandpa is coming to visit, Lucy wants to use glue in order to make a collage from twigs, leaves, feathers, sand, and even a piece of her hair. This is the kind of picture that Grandpa can feel with his fingers because he is blind. He tells her that it is the best picture that he has ever "seen".
Response: Explain the sense of touch with the class and then introduce a "feeling" box with different items inside. Have the children each reach into the box without looking and then guess what the object is that they are touching. Finally, review the five senses and have the class rank them in order of importance. Discuss.

3. THANK YOU, MR. FALKER by P. Polacco. (Philomel, 1998).

Plot: Trisha is overjoyed at starting school and learning how to read. However, from the very start, when she tries to read, all the letters and numbers get jumbled up. Her classmates begin to call her "dummy". Finally, in the fifth grade the new teacher in the school discovers her problem and he together with the reading specialist work with Trisha after school. After a few months, they give Trisha her first book and she is able to read it successfully. At last, she begins to love school.

Response: Discuss with the children how each person is unique and has a special talent, just like Trisha who can draw beautifully. Distribute papers with a different student's name at the top of each sheet. Then ask the children each to write a short paragraph about the talents of the person whose name appears on their sheet (e.g., Josh is a good soccer player. He runs faster than anybody on the team). Collect the papers, and after editing them, place them in a class book so all children can read about their personal talents—again and again.